

LANDOWNERS FOR WILDLIFE



COMMON PLANTS OF THE LOUISIANA GULF COASTAL PLAIN

By Jeffrey Taverner, Wildlife Biologist

Most hunters know that deer and turkeys consume acorns and soft mast (such as persimmon and muscadine), but many hunters may not realize that these particular wildlife foods are only available during a few months of the year. Soft mast is ripe and available to wildlife for only a couple of months in the fall, and acorns (hard mast) generally drop only during late fall and winter. Some oaks (especially the red oak group) require two years to produce ripe acorns. In truth, acorn production is never guaranteed from any particular oak tree on an annual basis. Nature's annual crop of hard mast can be severely impacted by environmental factors such as intense rainfall events or even reduced insect pollination. An intense summertime hail storm or strong wind storm may drastically reduce hard mast production throughout an entire forest. Extended drought may reduce both hard and soft mast production for years. When seasonal food supplies are unavailable, wildlife must shift its food preferences to other sources of nutrition. It is actually this "core" group of plants that sustains wildlife populations throughout the year. Hunters may plant seasonal food plots which help provide nutrients through the winter and spring months, but most wildlife species cannot depend on humans to supply their annual food requirements. Other plants provide the essential year-round food supply that sustains most wildlife populations. Knowing which plants are preferred by game species of wildlife can be a useful tool for hunters. Recognizing seasonal food preferences and the seasonal availability of food plants can help a hunter pattern his quarry. An understanding of what plants are available for wildlife on your property can help you make better forest management decisions. Managing and promoting wildlife plants should be a primary objective for a biologically sound wildlife management plan.



Photo by David Cappaert, Michigan State University, forestryimages.org

SMILAX (Greenbrier)

Smilax is known by various common names such as catbriers, greenbriers and prickly ivy. Its distinctive bright green leaves are heart-shaped, ranging from 4 to 30 cm. long. Greenbrier may form a dense, shrubby thicket, but it is usually encountered by hunters as a long, single, very strong woody vine with painful thorns. It may grow up trees and other plants, but is often prostrate on the ground. There are both deciduous and evergreen species. The plant is very damage-tolerant and capable of growing back from its rhizomes after being cut down or burned. Its berries provide an important food source for a wide variety of forest bird species, and its young, soft tendrils and leaves are a highly desired browse item of white-tailed deer.

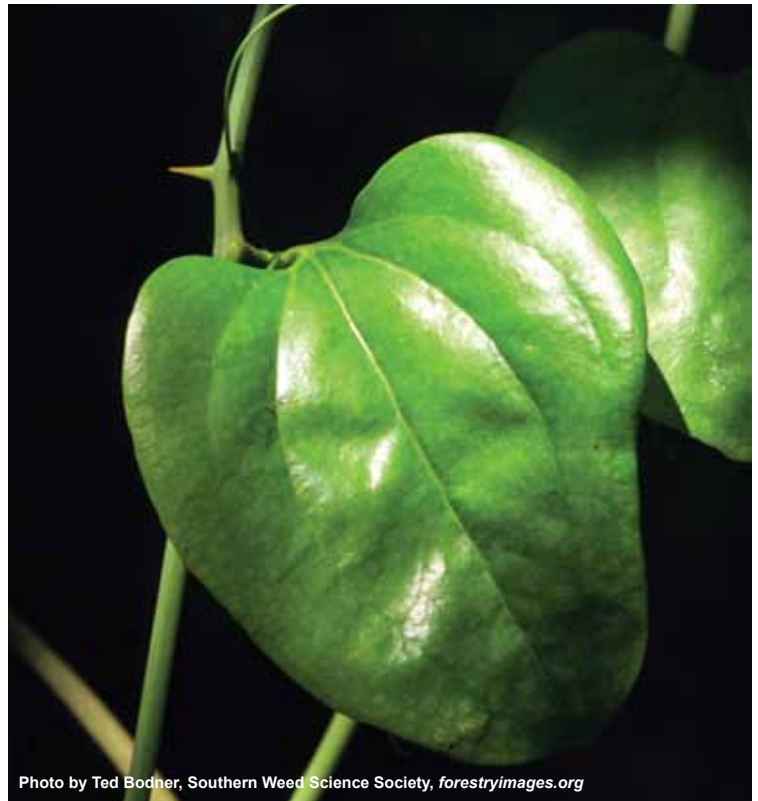


Photo by Ted Bodner, Southern Weed Science Society, forestryimages.org



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PHYTOLACCA AMERICANA (Pokeweed)

American pokeweed is a common perennial plant with a wide variety of common names, American nightshade, polk salad, inkberry, pigeon berry, pokeweed, redweed and red ink plant. It is found throughout most of the United States, commonly growing in field edge habitats or recent timber cutting sites. It grows well in sun or shade and readily survives fire due to its ability to resprout from the root. All parts of this plant can be highly toxic to most mammals, but human consumption of the young leaves is possible after a series of boiling. The plant has green or red stems, and large, simple leaves. It also has a large white taproot. White flowers produce long clumps of purple black berries. These berries are a food source for songbirds, and birds provide the primary method of seed dispersal.



Photo by Allen Bridgman, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, forestryimages.org



Photo by Ted Bodner,
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DESMODIUM (Ticktrefoil, Beggars' lice)

Members of the legume family, these plants are generally found as herbs or small shrubs. Some species have bright, showy flowers which produce seeds classified as loment. These long strands of seeds are individually enclosed in a segment (loment) that can be dispersed individually or by the whole strand. These species are usually considered an obnoxious weed, because their seedpods contain numerous hair-like structures which grab hold of hair and clothing. An encounter with this plant may result in hundreds of loment stuck in hunting clothes or pet hair. However, the seeds are a very important food source for northern bobwhite, turkeys and many other ground-foraging birds. Most species of *Desmodium* are heavily browsed by deer during the spring and summer months when plant parts are green and succulent.



Photo by Ted Bodner, Southern Weed Science Society, forestryimages.org

RUBUS (Blackberry, Dewberry)

Blackberries and dewberries are well known plants very common across the United States. Rubus is a very diverse plant group which contains over 375 identified species. Blackberries grow rapidly as dense, thorny thickets in woods, scrub, hillsides and hedgerows. The plants tolerate poor soils, and is oftentimes one of the first plants to colonize open areas, ditches and vacant lots. Virtually any disturbed soil seems to be susceptible to colonization by *Rubus*. Pale white or pink flowers (2 to 3 cm. in diameter) are produced in late spring and early summer. These flowers produce multi-seeded, fleshy, tangy fruits which are consumed by many different wildlife species. The fruit is highly desired by humans, used in desserts, wines and eaten fresh. Blackberry thickets provide escape cover for wildlife, as well as nesting cover for ground nesting birds and small mammals. Many wildlife biologists consider *Rubus* to be the most common browse plant for white-tailed deer in the eastern and southeastern United States.



Photo by Ted Bodner, Southern Weed Science Society, forestryimages.org

LONICERA JAPONICUM

(Japanese Honeysuckle)

Though actually native to eastern Asia (Japan, Korea, northern and eastern China, and Taiwan), Japanese honeysuckle is a major invasive species in North America. It is a common bushy vine, found in large thickets around abandoned farms and fencerows. It is fast-growing and resilient, able to climb trees to a height exceeding 30 feet. The flowers have a familiar fragrance that is widely recognized throughout the southern United States during spring and early summer. Its fruit is a dark blue berry, 5 to 8 mm. in diameter, containing numerous seeds. These seeds provide a nutritious food for quail and songbirds. Turkeys feed on both the seeds and the leaves. Honeysuckle is an extremely important year-round browse plant for deer, perhaps one of the most preferred. Its dense growth also provides escape cover for a wide variety of wildlife.



Photo by Chuck Barger, University of Georgia, forestryimages.org



Photo by Jerry A. Payne, USDA Agricultural Research Service, forestryimages.org



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